Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 12, 2016

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20502

Dear Mr. President:

We strongly condemn the Department of Homeland Security's recent enforcement operation targeting refugee mothers and children from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. The DHS operation has generated widespread fear and panic in immigrant communities and has far-reaching impacts beyond the alleged targets for removal. The operation raises numerous due process concerns including meaningful access to legal counsel for mothers and children after apprehension and DHS officers reportedly using deceptive tactics to gain entrance into private residences. For these reasons and others, we believe that this operation should be immediately suspended until we can ensure no mother or child will be sent back to a country where they would face persecution, torture or death.

Globally, there are currently more refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons – an estimated 60 million – than at any time since World War II. You and your Administration have upheld time-honored American values by offering refuge to those fleeing violence and disorder in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. We commend you for that.

However, these same fundamental American values have not been applied in your Administration's policies towards Central American refugee mothers and children. The brutality of violence in Central America is undeniable, and yet this Administration has failed to provide a comprehensive refugee solution for those seeking international refugee protection. According to data shared by DHS, 85% of Central American families in detention have established threshold eligibility for refugee protection. Rather than preserving our commitment to refugee protection, your Administration continues to pursue policies that treat Central American refugees as an immigration enforcement matter.

Thus far, your Administration has responded to the Central American refugee crisis with an emphasis on deterrence rather than the need for a regional refugee solution. Your Administration has used family detention, Spanish language communication campaigns in Central America urging people not to come to the United States, and financial assistance to Mexico to deter, arrest, and return those fleeing violence. This strategy has proven to be ineffective, as mothers and children continue to arrive at our Southwest border seeking refugee protection. Desperate Central American mothers and children will continue to flee to the United States and seek protection, regardless of the deterrent actions taken by this Administration.

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The recent operation to apprehend and remove families – several of whom reported inadequate legal representation – is the latest failure in this enforcement strategy. The fact that several of these families were subsequently granted emergency stays of removal indicates that the system has failed these refugees, notwithstanding final administrative removal orders. A final administrative removal order does not necessarily mean that these mothers and children do not have legitimate claims for refugee protection. We are gravely concerned that DHS may have already removed mothers and children from the United States and returned them to violent and dangerous situations in their home countries.

The crisis in our hemisphere will only be resolved when the United States engages in a comprehensive, regional solution to this refugee crisis. This solution should include refugee screening and resettlement, the use of safe havens in appropriate third countries, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for those individuals in the United States, the use of priority refugee processing, and other humanitarian remedies. It is critical that this approach include cooperation with other countries in the Western Hemisphere. The violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America and the resulting refugee flow affects our entire region, and the United States' solution should include a regional refugee resettlement program as well as increased capacity building of asylum systems in neighboring countries.

This comprehensive approach should also include collaboration with non-governmental organizations with expertise in international refugee protection such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Organizations such as UNHCR can assist the United States and our regional partners in screening refugees and can provide critical guidance regarding the best practices for refugee care and management.

The goal of this comprehensive refugee approach should be to ensure that Central American refugees, particularly mothers and children, are able to live free from an endless cycle of violence and persecution. It is time to start working towards a solution that provides a practical and humane response to the mothers and children from Central America fleeing for their lives and seeking safety and protection. Failure to provide this comprehensive solution will continue to lead to disorder at our border and will further a sense of unease across the United States.

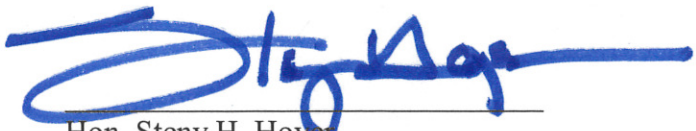
We urge you to immediately halt the current enforcement actions towards Central American mothers and children and take steps to engage in a comprehensive effort with our hemispheric partners to address this regional refugee crisis in an appropriate humanitarian manner.

Sincerely,

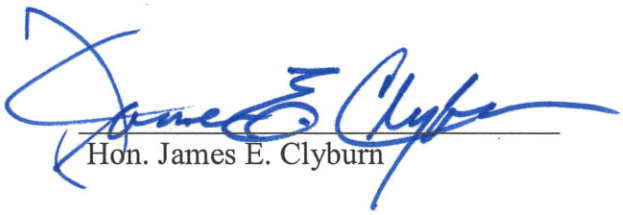
Hon. Zoe Lofgren

Hon. Lucille Roybal-Allard

Hon. Luis V. Gutiérrez



Hon. Steny H. Hoyer



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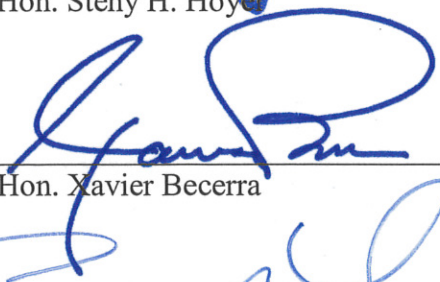

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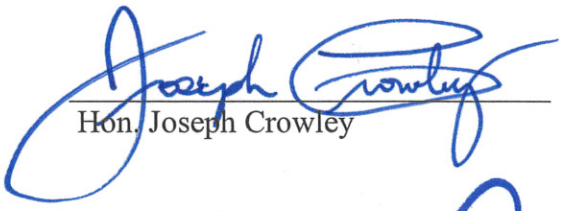
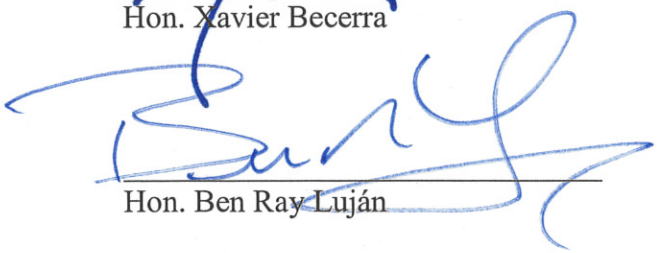


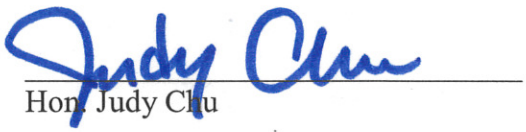
Hon. Joseph Crowley



Hon. Ben Ray Luján

Hon. G. K. Butterfield

Hon. Linda T. Sánchez



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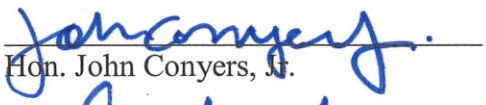
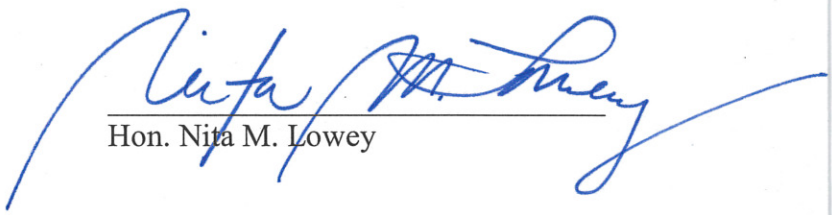


Hon. John Conyers, Jr.



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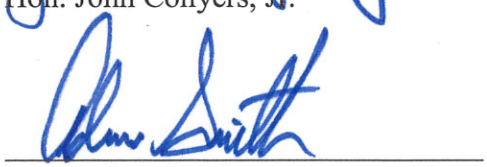

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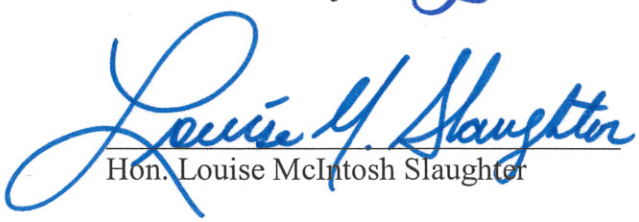

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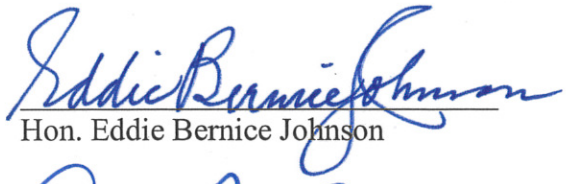
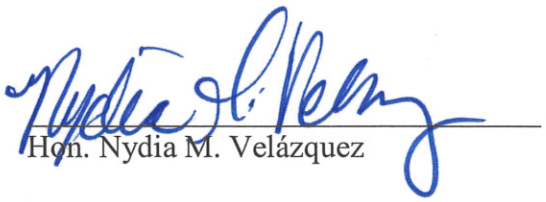
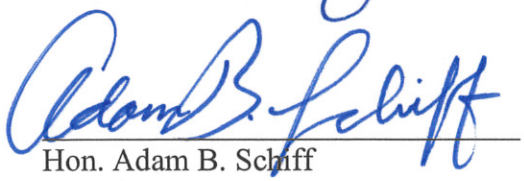


Hon. Eddie Bernice Johnson



Hon. Nydia M. Velázquez



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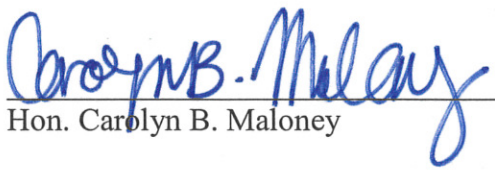
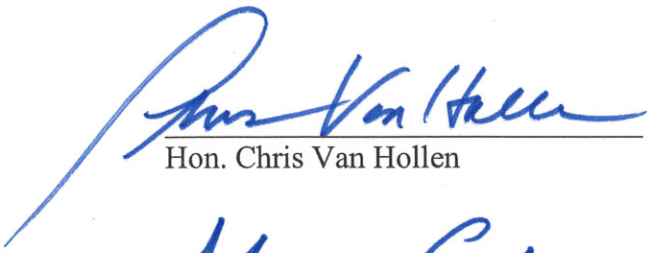


Hon. Carolyn B. Maloney



Hon. Chris Van Hollen

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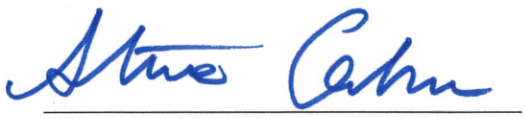

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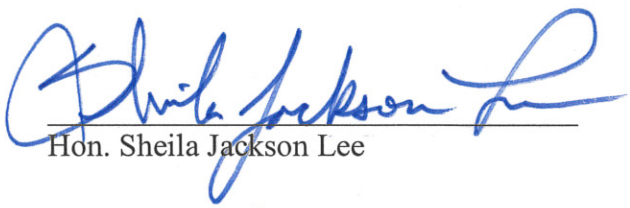
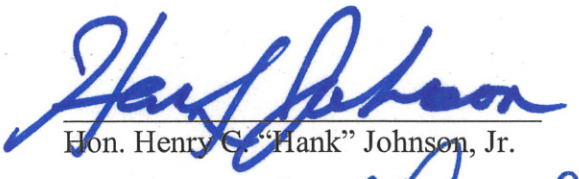


Hon. Sheila Jackson Lee



Hon. Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.

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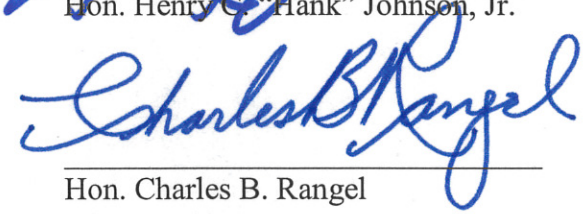

Hon. Charles B. Rangel

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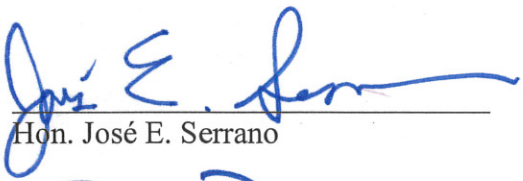

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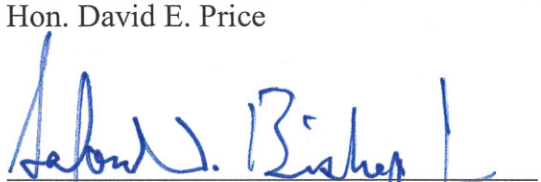

Hon. Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.

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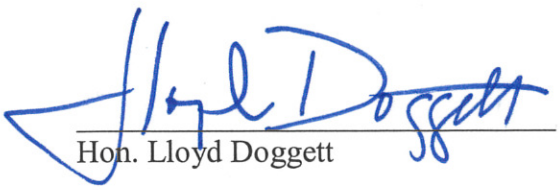
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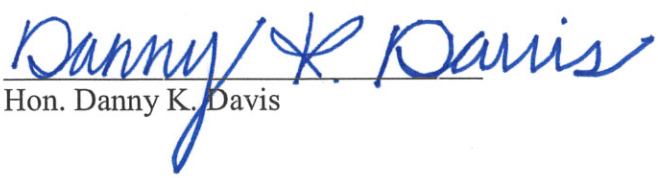
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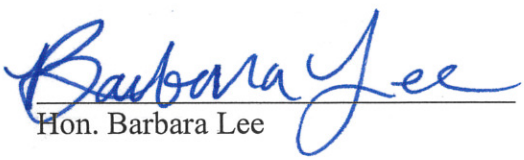
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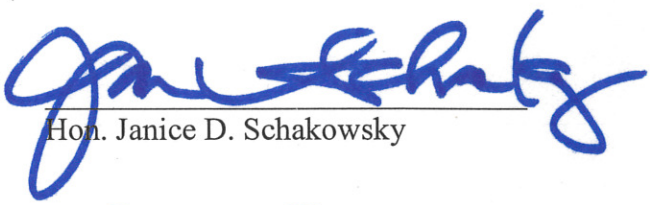
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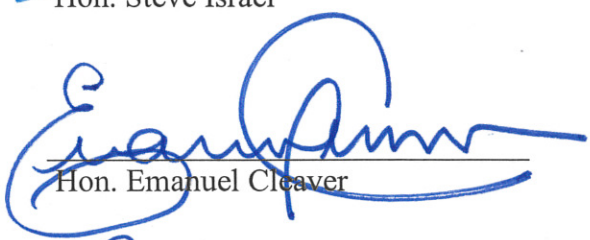
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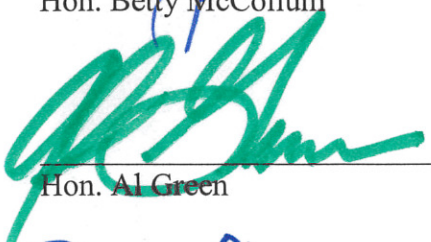
Hon. Al Green

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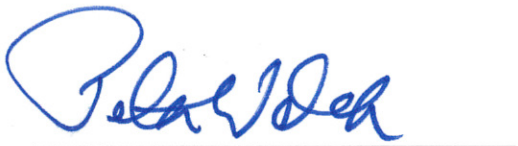
Hon. Keith Ellison



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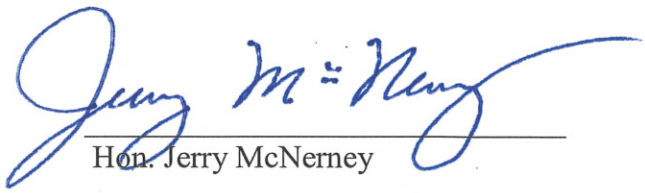
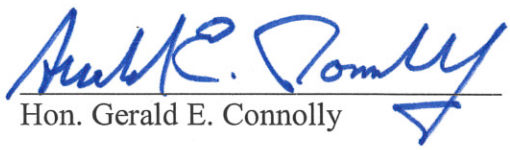


Hon. Jerry McNerney

Hon. André Carson

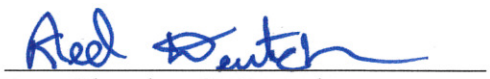


Hon. Gerald E. Connolly

Hon. Chellie Pingree

Hon. Paul Tonko

Hon. Mike Quigley



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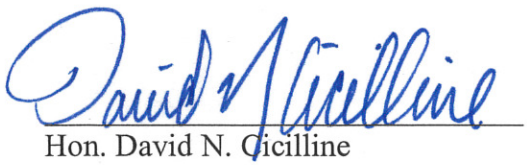
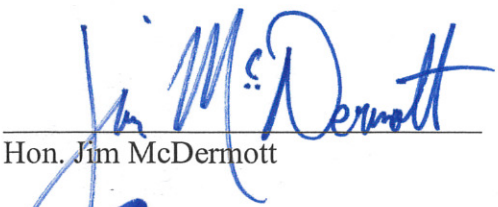


Hon. David N. Cicilline

Hon. Eleanor Holmes Norton



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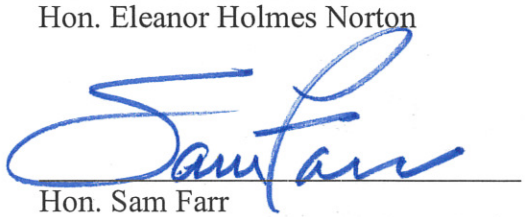

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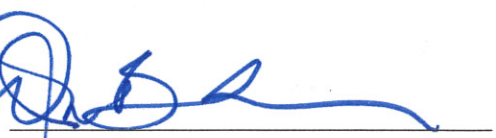
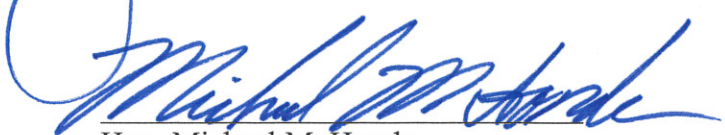
Hon. Earl Blumenauer



Hon. John B. Larson

Hon. Michael E. Capuano



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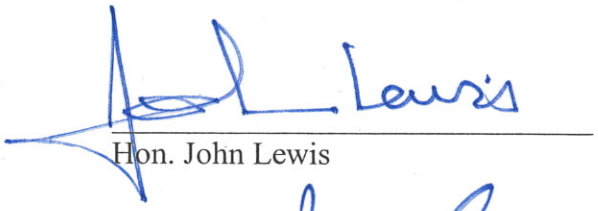

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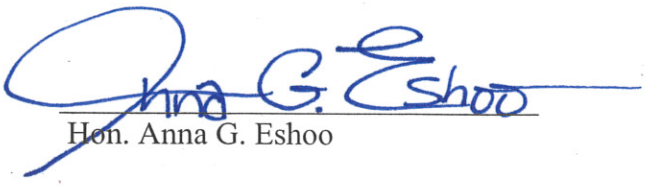

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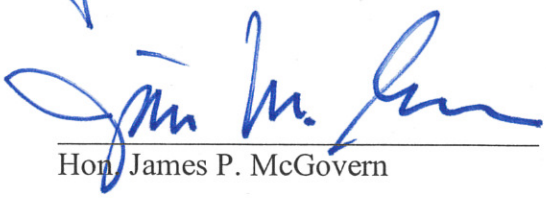
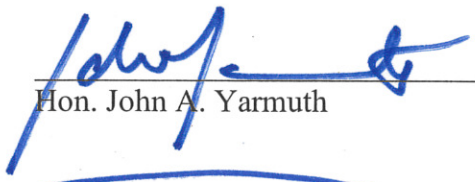


Hon. James P. McGovern

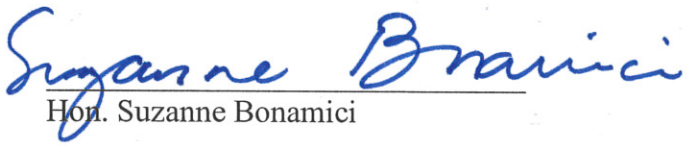
Hon. Mike Thompson



Hon. John A. Yarmuth

Hon. Karen Bass

Hon. Cedric L. Richmond



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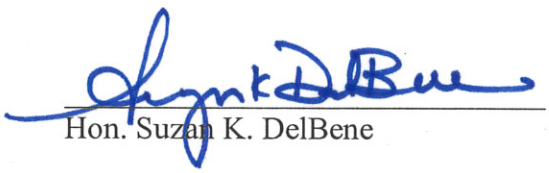

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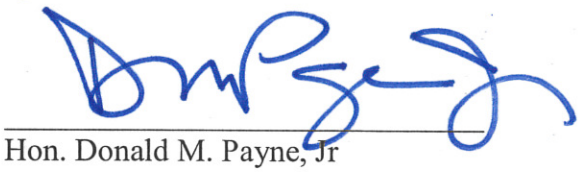
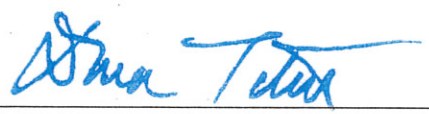
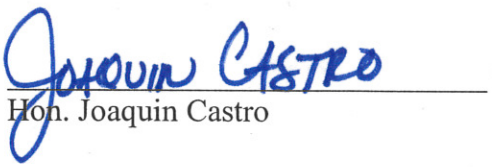


Hon. Donald M. Payne, Jr



Hon. Dina Titus



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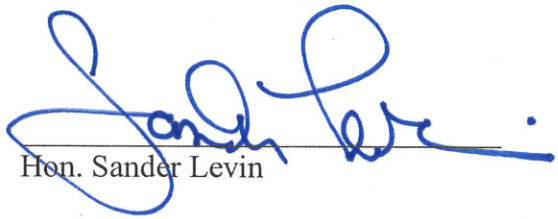
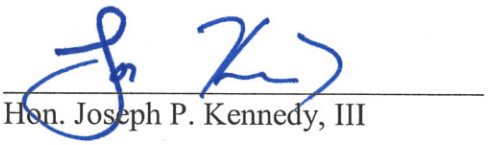
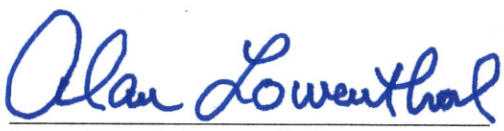


Hon. Sander Levin



Hon. Joseph P. Kennedy, III

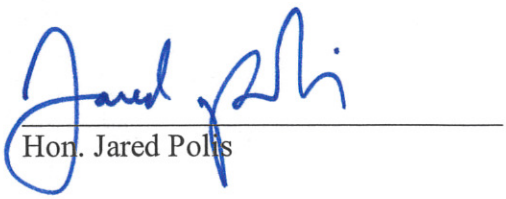
Hon. Daniel T. Kildee



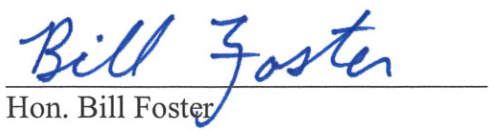
Hon. Alan S. Lowenthal

Hon. Michelle Lujan Grisham

Hon. Patrick E. Murphy

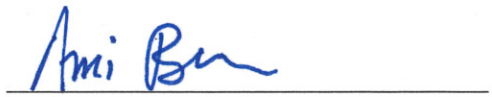


Hon. Jared Polis

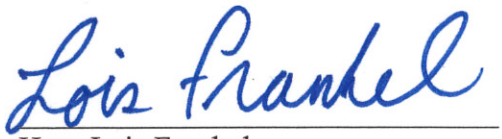


Hon. Bill Foster

Hon. Terri A. Sewell



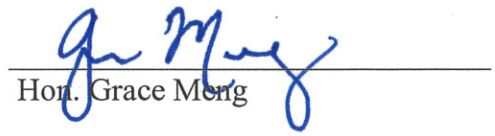
Hon. Ami Bera



Hon. Lois Frankel

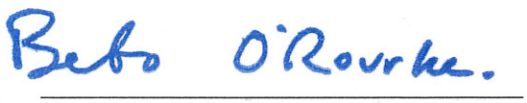
Hon. Julia Brownley

Hon. Tony Cárdenas



Hon. Grace Meng

Hon. Hakeem S. Jeffries



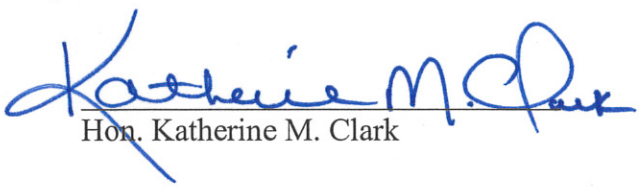
Hon. Beto O'Rourke

Hon. Scott H. Peters

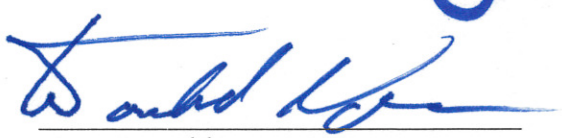
Hon. Mark Takano

Hon. Juan Vargas

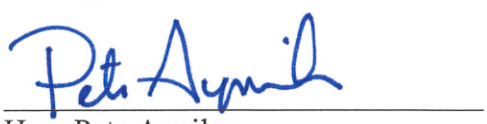
Hon. Robin L. Kelly



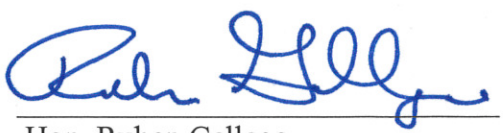
Hon. Katherine M. Clark



Hon. Donald Norcross

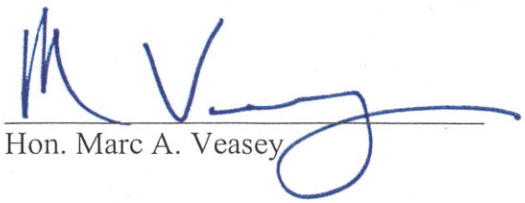


Hon. Pete Aguilar



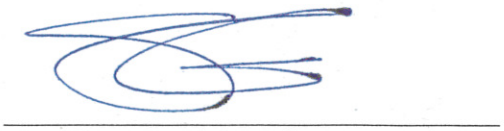
Hon. Ruben Gallego

Hon. John Sarbanes

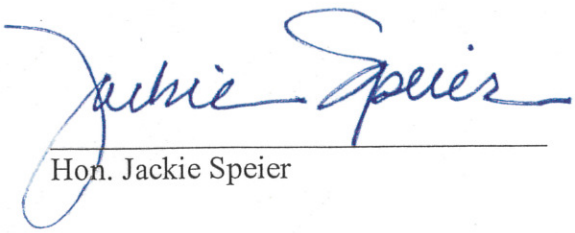


Hon. Marc A. Veasey

Hon. Matt Cartwright

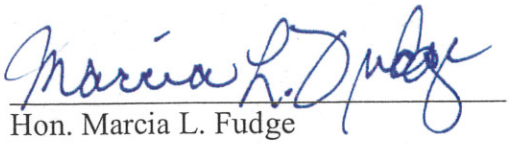


Hon. Sean Patrick Maloney

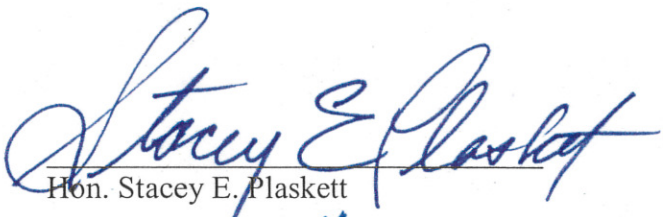


Hon. Jackie Speier

Hon. Kathleen M. Rice

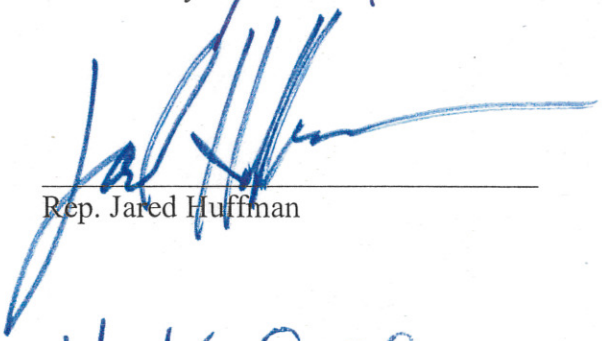


Hon. Marcia L. Fudge

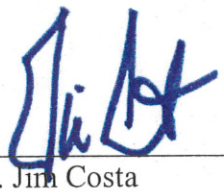


Hon. Stacey E. Plaskett

Hon. Loretta Sanchez

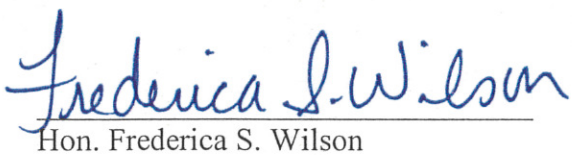


Rep. Jared Huffman



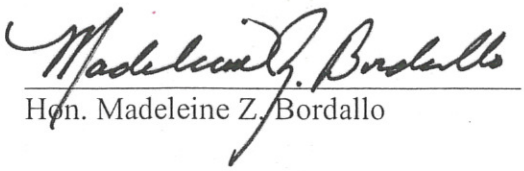
Hon. Jim Costa

Hon. Ann Kirkpatrick

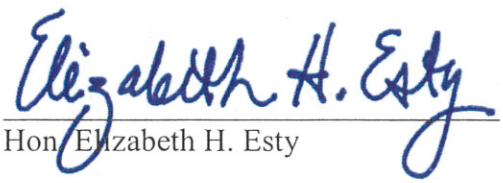


Hon. Frederica S. Wilson

Hon. Janice Hahn



Hon. Madeleine Z. Bordallo



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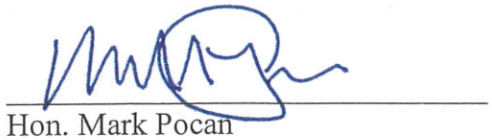
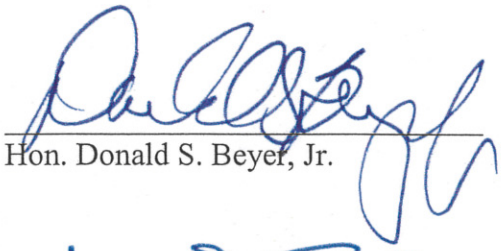


Hon. Mark Pocan

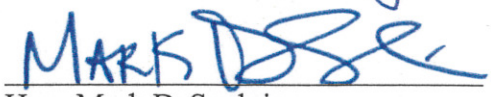
Hon. Eric Swalwell

Hon. Filemon Vela



Hon. Donald S. Beyer, Jr.

Hon. Bonnie Watson Coleman

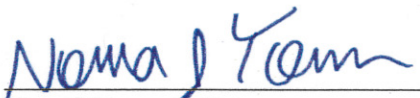


Hon. Mark DeSaulnier

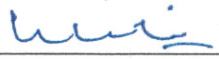
Hon. Debbie Dingell

Hon. Ted Lieu

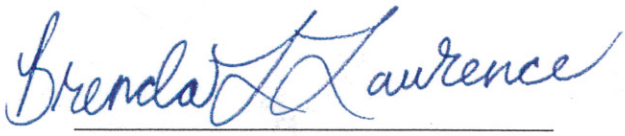
Hon. Mark Takai



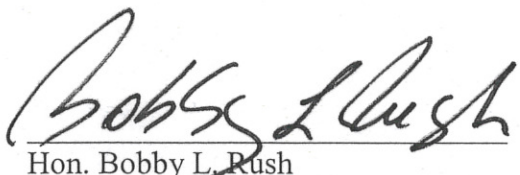
Hon. Norma J. Torres



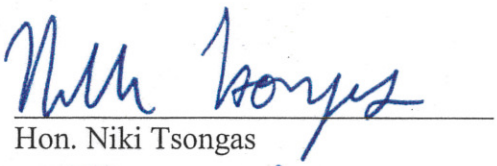
Hon. Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan



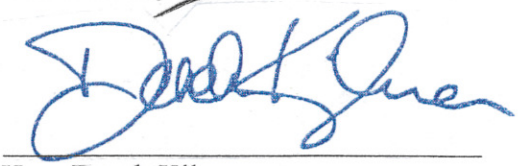
Hon. Brenda L. Lawrence



Hon. Bobby L. Rush

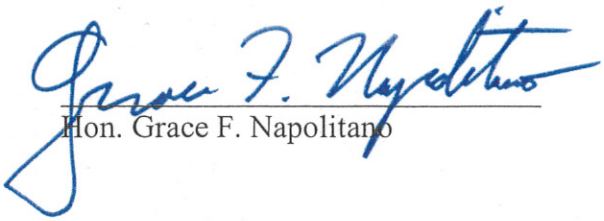


Hon. Niki Tsongas



Hon. Derek Kilmer

Hon. Brian Higgins



Hon. Grace F. Napolitano

Hon. Pedro R. Pierluisi